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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the curriculum of undergraduate psychology have provided greater opportunities for experiential training to augment prior emphases on didactic concept training. A national survey of larger public and private undergraduate psychology programs was conducted to determine the status of non-classroom experiential learning. These data support the conclusion that such learning opportunities were widely accepted as useful, but highly variable and problematical in their implementation. The mission of internships was perceived as a collateral tool for coursework to prepare students for graduate work rather than as a tool for the terminal B.A. student. The findings suggest that faculty should respect student goals and labor market realities and prepare their students to be like themselves in academic preparation, humanistic orientation, and respect for knowledge, but not necessarily in terms of career role. (Author/JAC)

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Out of the Ivory Tower:

Undergraduate Internships in Psychology

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Presented at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 1982.

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Out of the Ivory Tower:
Undergraduate Internships in Psychology

The history of psychology in the United States shows a cyclic use of psychology in the service of the needs of the country, rising to peaks in times of national emergency such as wars. This pattern, however, has always involved a limited portion of the total activity of academic psychology. Despite the efforts of Kurt Lewin and others to encourage "action research," it is only recently that there has been applied efforts by significant numbers of psychologists not associated with clinical practice. Donald Campbell advocated that psychology modify its traditional research orientation to assume a "spirit of social experimentation". Leona Tyler encouraged us to use our skills as consultants and facilitators to assist other citizens to solve the problems that increasingly face us all. The 1973 Vail Conference recommended that programs be oriented to specific competence areas so that they could meet community needs. These social interests were somewhat addressed but concern with student preferences has seldom shaped curricular direction. It has taken major external shifts in the zeitgeist to cause related changes in the undergraduate curriculum in psychology.

One major factor was the recognition that 75% to 95% of all undergraduate psychology majors do not intend to go to graduate school (e.g., Turner, 1974; Ware, 1982). The federal cutbacks in research and training funds and the emerging decline in overall college enrollments, especially at the four-year level, combine to make the academic teaching/research market an increasingly closed avenue for the majority of students even if they do intend graduate training (Mathews, 1979). The interests of students have become increasingly

pragmatic in orientation, in terms of extrinsic rewards and career preparation but retaining echoes of the humanistic orientation of a decade earlier. The change in student populations to include older students has intensified this pragmatic focus on vocational preparation.

These and similar forces have interacted with forces inside academia to generate a systematic change in the curricula of undergraduate psychology to provide opportunites for specific experiential training to augment the prior emphasis on didactic concept training (McGovern, 1979; Ware, 1982). A variety of articles, especially in the APA journal, Teaching of Psychology (eg., Mathews, 1979; Norcross and Wogan, 1982; Sherman, 1982), bear witness to the options being provided to allow undergraduates some hands-on experience in the application of psychological principles outside the lecture hall. Nevertheless, there remains an inertial tendency to view the undergraduate major as primarily pretraining for graduate school preparation for academic research jobs or clinical practice (Harper, 1982; Korn, 1974; Kulik, 1973; Shiverick, 1977). This flies in the face of the external reality. Today's students desire sub-graduate level career training to prepare them to use the tools and concepts of psychology in non-psychological career roles (Morris, 1982).

The response to these complex change forces has proceeded often without systematic planning, often in a subordinate, grudging response to local pressures. By and large, the recent literature displays a variety of isolated case studies on programs designed in a reactive, poorly evaluated trial and error fashion (Ware, 1982), displaying occasional success and frequent painful lessons and usually retaining the historical mission for the major. This paper reports a systematic sample of these contemporary efforts to

provide non-classroom, experiential learning and presents a discussion of the lessons that have been learned in the efforts.

Method

The Directors of Undergraduate Study at 200 of the larger undergraduate psychology programs were contacted by mail. The sample reflected a geographically distributed group, including both public and private schools. It was selected so as to generate a general sense of typical programs, along with the impressions that were held with regard to these programs by their directors. Responses were received from 92 of the 200 programs, showing an average size of 290 majors, an average of 38 courses per year and an average institutional enrollment of 10,537 students. It is likely, however, that the proportion of non-respondents with such programs is much lower.

Results

There was general agreement that the program was useful since 93% said that it was either definitely or probably valuable. The nature of the programs varied widely, but most schools offered a variety of placements. The largest category, logically, was pre-clinical (64%) but over half also offered placements in social services, criminal justice, school or pre-school, or personal counseling. About 1/3 offered options for guidance counseling, personnel or industrial placements. Only 7% mentioned research as an option.

Almost 60% offered both individually designed experiences and on-going sites for one or more students. Respondents reported an average of about 48 students a year, placed in the permanent sites and about 25 a year in the individually designed experiences. All the students received academic credit but the amount of credit varied. About 2/3 received letter grades. Supervision patterns were evenly mixed among faculty supervision, site supervision or joint

supervision. Half indicated that there was a formal contract with the off-campus site but few provided compensation to the site.

It is significant that only 16% identified skills development as the biggest benefit of the program. In fact, there was a repeated feeling that they wanted to make it clear to students that they were NOT trained and should not be considered to be so. The largest category of benefits involved the general experiential aspects of the placement (43%) with smaller groups crediting aid in making career choices, chances to develop job contacts, a balanced education, and two responses reporting the major benefit to be public relations for the college.

There was even less consensus about the biggest deficiency, but it generally involved the quality control aspects, such as poor supervision (35%), lack of academic quality (32%), and smaller groups reporting a lack of ability and preparation of the students, lack of adequate placements and the misuse of students by agencies.

When asked about the major factors facilitating or blocking the success of such a program, about half (52%) agreed that cooperation between site staff and faculty was the key factor with smaller groups naming supervision, internal program support and student quality.

Discussion

These were larger, predominantly public-funded undergraduate programs that were associated with graduate programs in psychology. The results may obscure shifts among smaller programs, which may be more responsive to market factors. However, this sample agreed on the value of non-classroom experience, but only as an orientation, not as a training experience. They recognized that valid experiences demanded more of departments, individual faculty, and students

than traditional courses. These extra demands on time, for planning, continuous monitoring, and supervision were seen to yield potentially large dividends in enhancing personal development and awareness of students. Although useful in guiding student decision-making about their futures, the opportunity to deliver actual services to community persons and agencies and to develop particular skills was of significantly lesser importance for the sample. It is reasonable to infer that the primary programmatic purpose was preparation for advance training via graduate school.

The results augment the data reported in the literature (Baron & Duerfeldt, 1980; Hess et al, 1978; Prerost, 1981; Sheverick, 1977; Vande Creek & Thompson, 1977). There are widespread efforts to provide field experiences and a reliable set of principles that can be extracted to effectively guide those experiences.

Recommendations

Planning. Directors must develop clear understanding and acceptance of the objectives of such a program among ALL departmental faculty, among students, among representatives of the placement sites, and pertinent administrators. Explicit learning contracts are essential. Pilot runs are a useful device. Limitations must be recognized and respected. The department and college must make an explicit commitment to support the program for a reasonable pilot period.

Selection Hard-headed, valid selection criteria must be developed for both students and placement sites. Students must have the academic and personal maturity to handle the different and often intense demands to be made upon them. It must be recognized that placement sites must fit the particular student. Better to have a later placement or no placement than a damaging one.

There will be "casualties", students who cannot handle their placement or students who decide to shift away from the field. Shifts based on reality testing are appropriate, but we can ill afford to lose students during the preliminary phases for a particular site.

Prerequisites. Students should be trained, intensively if necessary, for the experience. Usually this means coursework, but also it means preparing them for the emotional demands to be faced. A frequent and useful pattern is to pair the field component with a focused, classroom experience prior to or parallel to the field experience. The linkage between theory and practice is essential as is socialization in the ethical aspects of their experience.

Supervision. There is a need for close faculty supervision which may demand more time and energy than normal courses. Faculty must insure that the learning contracts are followed by all parties. Frequent student contracts and periodic field reviews are necessary. This suggests that the faculty assignment should NOT be an overload, but one of the regular course assignments. Whether pass/fail or letter grade, student evaluation is difficult here, but high standards are more important here than for other courses. Students must process their experience not just live it. They must go beyond the affective to the cognitive and behavioral domains of understanding and the combination of these three domains places much greater demands and leads to far more frequent problems than the hardest classroom course.

Protection. The student must contribute to learning objectives. It is easy for agencies and individual site staff to see students as volunteer workers designed to relieve them of scut work. While some such work is useful, faculty must protect students against the degrading of their experience since often students may be unable to confront their site supervisor, at least successfully.

Time Pressures. Time problems must be anticipated. Student schedules seldom show an optimal match with site needs, although interim or summer options are more flexible. Students need to recognize that they must meet their commitments even when it is inconvenient. Also, a semester may be too short a period for assimilation of an experience.

Evaluation. The program director must have a clearly defined system to assess the effectiveness of the field experience program. There should be objective criteria, linked explicitly to the stated program mission of both short-term and long-term duration.

Conclusion

These data suggest that a clearly defined tool exists for preparing students for the use of psychology outside of teaching but that a clear prejudice remains against its use for terminal bachelor's level students. Faculty serve a role as instructor, mentor, and role model, but increasingly need to realize that their role ought not be to turn out veritable role-clones of themselves. They need to respect student goals and market realities and to prepare their students to be like themselves in academic preparation, in humanistic orientation, and respect for knowledge, but NOT necessarily in terms of career role. We pride ourselves on leading students to psychological insights about themselves and their society and yet lack the confidence or perspective to see how psychological concepts can be directly applied to vocational roles outside that specifically labeled "Psychologist." Ironically, the research-based empirical approach to analysis of problems and solutions to those problems is perhaps the most important tool any graduate can use in virtually every employment role. Ego-deflating though it may be, acceptance of that mission will serve the needs of students, ourselves, and the society increasingly well in the years to come.

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